

ST. LOUIS

SECTION D

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Dead Creek: 10 Years, Little Progress

By Christine Bertelson
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Legend has it that Dead Creek got its name from prehistoric Indians who dug a channel along the Mississippi River to carry their dead downstream by canoe for burial.

Today the ominous name is still apt. No longer free-flowing, Dead Creek is a contaminated ditch that runs three miles past heavy industries, back yards and empty fields between Cahokia and Sauget just south of Illinois Route 3. For most of this century the creek has been used by industries and businesses as an open sewer.

Dead Creek and a half dozen areas nearby — known collectively as the Dead Creek sites — are ranked by state environmental officials the most toxic turf in Illinois.

The ground water is heavily contaminated with PCBs, heavy metals, arsenic, chlorinated solvents and a long list of other compounds toxic to human beings and aquatic life.

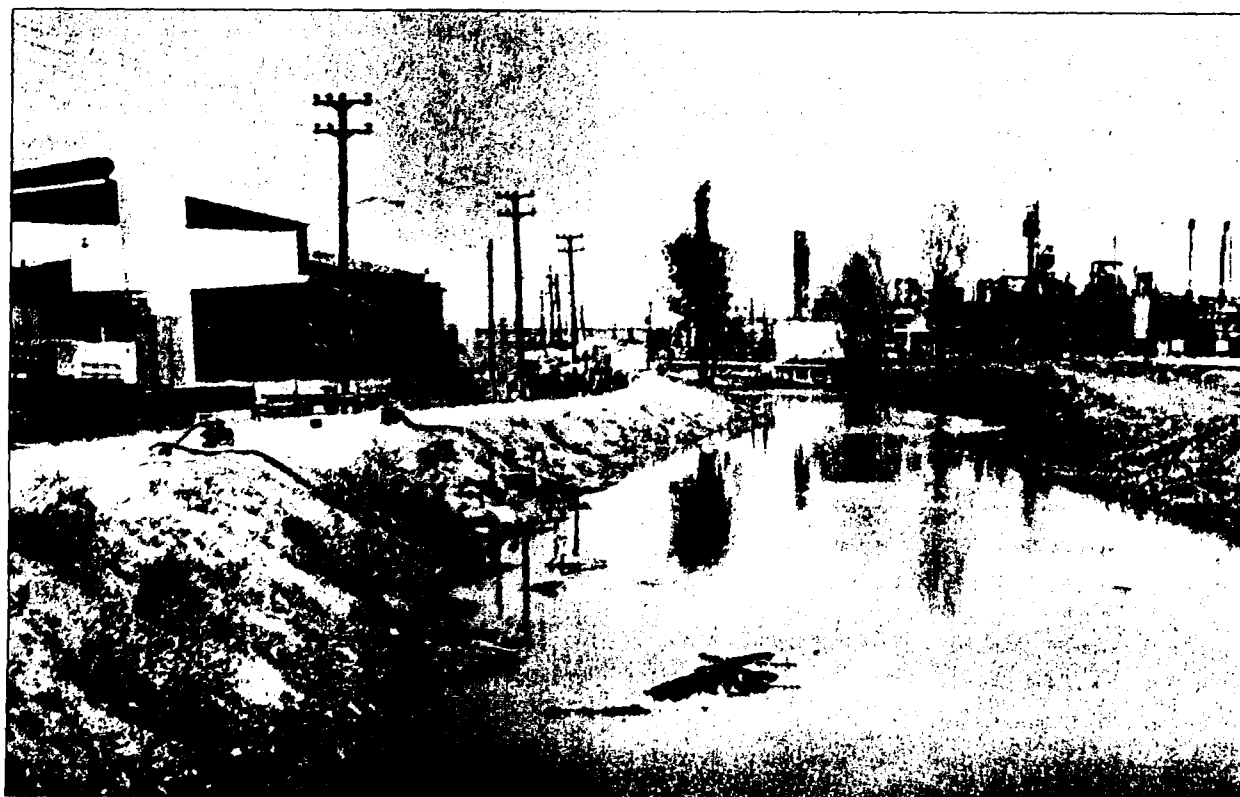
Every day, large amounts of toxins are moving underground into the Mississippi River and the drinking water of millions of people downstream, according to state environmental officials.

In the most heavily polluted areas of the creek near large industrial complexes that line Route 3, nothing lives in Dead Creek. No plants, no fish, no frogs.

One stretch of the creek is coated with a rubbery goo, under which thousands of gallons of toxic chemical wastes slosh and seep.

From time to time, phosphorus residues in the creek bed have burst into flame, glowing eerily at night.

"If you consider Sauget sites as a whole, this is by far the worst in the state, no question about it," said Paul Takacs, the state Environmental Pro-



Dead Creek in its channel near Illinois Route 3. Officials say the cleanup of the toxic ditch will cost tens of millions of dollars.

Robert LaRouche/Post-Dispatch

tection Agency's project manager for the Sauget sites.

It has been 11 years since Pete Lauman's wire-haired terrier went ex-

ploring in Dead Creek and died of chemical burns.

"He was tough, but he wasn't tough enough to beat all the chemicals in

that creek," said Lauman, 35. His trim white house on Judith Lane in Sauget is perched on the east bank of Dead

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Creek.

Since that incident, the creek has been fenced off at several locations where it flows near residential areas. Wells have been dug to monitor groundwater and surface pollution, and some sites have been surveyed for buried waste drums. But in 10 years the cleanup of Dead Creek has gone precisely nowhere, say those who live nearby.

Lauman no longer can remember the name of his hapless terrier. But he could hardly forget the problems that persist in Dead Creek.

"I don't really want to live here because of the pollution," said Lauman, who lost a kidney to cancer four years ago. "I can't claim [the cancer] was due to Dead Creek, but it's kind of unusual at my age."

"But I can't sell my property," Lauman said. "If I could move it somewhere else it would be great."

Rick McDonnell, 38, grew up on Judith Lane, swimming and fishing in Dead Creek and oblivious to its hazards. But today, with children of his own, he is more wary.

"Nobody knew anything then," said McDonnell, who works at Monsanto Co.'s W.G. Krummrich chemical plant nearby. "I haven't been sick ... yet. But I think they should clean it up."

That, say state officials, is easier said than done.

Two years ago the state agency spent more than \$1 million documenting the pollution in Dead Creek and 16 contaminated sites in the Saugatuck and Cahokia area within a radius of about 1.5 miles of the creek.

State officials said the cleanup will be a monumental job, costing tens of millions of dollars and lasting at least a decade. That is money the state does not have, officials said, noting that the Illinois Legislature this year refused to fund the Clean Illinois program for cleanup of toxic waste sites.

The report — an 8-inch-thick document — was used to bolster the state's argument that the Dead Creek sites belong on the national priority list of polluted sites eligible for federal money.

The line for U.S. dollars is long, and the Dead Creek sites missed the list this year after hitting a bureaucratic snag when the federal government failed to put into effect new rules for ranking polluted sites.

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The drag at the top has also made it harder for the state to wield its stick over polluters, Zeman said. Without the imminent threat of federal intervention, polluters are more likely to balk at cleaning up their messes.

In the meantime, Illinois has stepped up its efforts to push companies into voluntary cleanups. Last winter the state EPA and attorney general's office began notifying current and former property owners, businesses and individuals who may have created the hazardous wastes in and around Dead Creek or helped transport, treat or dump them there that they were "potentially responsible" for cleanup.

The state could force property and business owners to reimburse it for cleanup costs, or pay damages up to three times the amount spent on cleanup.

Among those on the list are Big River Zinc Corp., Browning-Ferris Industries of St. Louis Inc., Cerro Copper Products Co., Clayton Chemical Co. and Monsanto.

The net has also been cast by the state over more than a dozen small property owners along Dead Creek, such as Robert Forsyth. Forsyth owns a Moto Gas service station and convenience store on the corner of a 20-acre lot on the east side of Route 3. The property line runs to the center of Dead Creek. In the 30 years his family has owned the land, most of it has been used for growing soybeans, he said.

Forsyth maintains that he and other small property owners are victims, not polluters. Forsyth said he would go bankrupt if he is forced to share the cost of cleaning up a mess he didn't create.

"The law says if you own it you are responsible to keep that property safe," Forsyth said. "I agree with that. But in this case it was not only impossible to control the pollution, there was no way to prevent it."

"If we had tried to dam the creek the big industries would have been down our throat in no time."

"We are totally innocent."

Last month Cerro Copper became the first industry in Sauget to come forward with a cleanup plan of its

State officials say the cleanup of Dead Creek will be a monumental job, costing tens of millions of dollars. Is money the state does not have, officials said.

Paying For Cleanup Called Cheaper Than Resisting

By Christine Bertelson
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

For Henry Schweik, president of Cerro Copper Co., the decision to spend \$12 million voluntarily to clean up 1,600 feet of Dead Creek was a form of insurance.

"We didn't contaminate Dead Creek. We may have contributed to it at one time," Schweik said. "But it costs a fortune to defend yourself against this kind of charge."

Rather than buck the charges and line lawyers' pockets in the process, Schweik chose to dive in and clean up the mess — a step no other industry in the area has taken.

The agreement between Illinois Attorney General Neil F. Hartigan's office and Cerro was made formal in a consent decree in U.S. District Court in East St. Louis last month.

"We didn't relish the prospect of our property being a Superfund site," a stigma that could affect property values, use, and the company's reputation, Schweik said.

Cerro hired its own environmental consultant, which found PCBs, heavy metals, chlorinated solvents and other chemicals in the creek sludge.

Until 1965, some of the sludge came from Cerro, as well as other industries next door —

Monsanto Co., Ethyl Petroleum Additives and Big River Zinc Corp.

Cerro plans to fill and remove contaminated sediment from the 1,600 feet of the creek that runs through the company's property.

"We thought it would be not only easier, but cheaper," Schweik said. "Superfund won't work because of the litigation and interminable squabbles" over the lines of responsibility, he said.

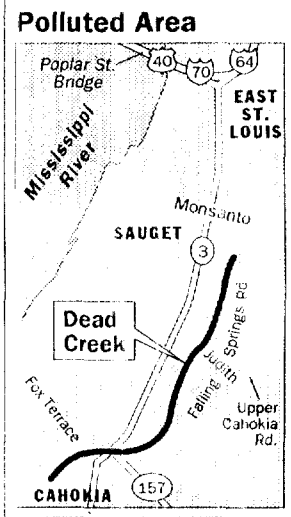
But Schweik is well aware that Cerro's \$12 million ounce of prevention will not necessarily spare it from contributing to a far more costly cure.

"That won't necessarily release the company from later involvement," said Paul Takacs of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

"Since there is so much interplay among the sites, an area could become recontaminated. We could sign off on one segment [of Dead Creek] today, and not know for 10 years what the future impact of the pollution is."

But whatever the future holds for Dead Creek, cleaning it up was "morally and economically the right thing to do," Schweik said.

"Whatever their motives were, they deserve a lot of credit," said Christine Zeman, an assistant attorney general. "We are hoping other companies will follow their lead."



From Borgman/Post-Dispatch

own, announcing it would spend \$12 million to dredge, filter, and reroute a stretch of Dead Creek on its property or Route 3 in Sauget.

Negotiations also are at a critical point with Monsanto, whose potential liability promises to be enormous, Zeman said. Monsanto wants to avoid the delays and detours of working with the federal bureaucracy.

"If we can work toward an acceptable solution with the Illinois EPA and the attorney general's office outside the federal Superfund program... it would be desirable from a financial

"Since it [Dead Creek] is so close to the river, most of the contamination has probably gone directly to the Mississippi."

PAUL TAKACS, Illinois environmental official

standpoint," said Max McCombs, in charge of government and environmental affairs at Monsanto's Krummrich plant.

"The more parties you have in any discussion, the longer things can take."

According to the report prepared for the Illinois EPA in 1988, Monsanto poured tons of liquid chemicals into several unlined pits and buried an unknown number of barrels of chemical wastes near its Krummrich plant. Although such housekeeping habits would be unthinkable — and illegal — today, they were common industrial practice 30, 40 and 50 years ago.

The focus of those negotiations now is a toxic chemical "landfill," capped in 1986 with clay. But the cap has not prevented the movement of liquids underneath, which are slowly making their way to the river, said Takacs of the state EPA. The western edge of the landfill is 100 feet from the Mississippi.

"Since it is so close to the river,



Pete Lauman standing alongside a fence that encloses Dead Creek. Lauman's wire-haired

terrier died of chemical burns 11 years ago after playing in the creek.

Robert LaRouche/Post-Dispatch

most of the contamination has probably gone directly to the Mississippi," Takacs said. "An area with this volume and toxicity creates all sorts of problems all the way down the river. There are towns just south of Sauget that use the Mississippi as their drinking water supply."

Most of those communities test and

treat the water for a fraction of the chemical contaminants washed into the river from Sauget, Takacs said.

"We have not really gotten to that point in discussions of accepting legal responsibility per se," McCombs said. "But we are not walking away from that issue. We just know it is going to be expensive and... a long process."

Too long to suit Judith Lane residents Pete Lauman and Rick McDonnell.

"It's all political," said McDonnell. "I don't blame the big industries like Monsanto. I think they are sincere in wanting to do something about it."

"But I don't know if we'll ever see it cleaned up. Not in our lifetime."